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ABSTRACT

Both film and ancient religious writing have much in common, especially in regard to their ability to convey powerful messages to modern audiences. A study analyzed the timeless meta-narratives in the ancient Hindu poem, the "Bhagavad Gita," and in the 1998 American film, "The Thin Red Line." It used the methodology of narrative criticism to make a cross-cultural contribution to philosophical and rhetorical studies that focus on the construction of evil and other philosophical themes in these two popular works. Since these two works potentially enshrine timeless cross-cultural narratives, an examination of these artifacts is warranted. The results of this inquiry indicate that these narratives construct issues of good/evil, self-transcendence, and personal duty in astonishingly similar ways. The study has shown that both artifacts portray evil as an inclination toward selfish action and the refusal to acknowledge a transcendent "ultimate" self behind the physical self of each human. The film points out that nature and humanity, once individuated and self-absorbed, go to war with itself. Both works also had similar themes in regard to issues of duty, selfless action, and the horror of war. The moral and enlightened individual is to avoid running away from the tragedies of existence and instead must uphold his duty with non-attached action. In both the literary portrayal and the cinematic portrayal of war, the narrative urges the warriors to fight with compassion and a lack of desire concerning the "fruits" of their actions. This study not only focuses attention on an undeveloped line of narrative inquiry, specifically that of ancient India, but also sheds comparative light on cross-cultural and multi-temporal narrative criticism in light of powerful philosophical storylines. (Contains 54 references.) (Author/RS)

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Both film and ancient religious writing have much in common, especially in regard to their ability to convey powerful messages to modern audiences. This paper analyzes the timeless meta-narratives in the ancient Hindu poem, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and in the 1998 American film, *The Thin Red Line*. This paper uses the methodology of narrative criticism to make a cross-cultural contribution to philosophical and rhetorical studies that focus on the construction of evil and other philosophical themes in these two popular works. Since these two works potentially enshrine timeless cross-cultural narratives, an examination of these artifacts is warranted. The results of this inquiry indicate that these narratives construct issues of good/evil, self-transcendence, and personal duty in astonishingly similar ways.

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Introduction

The narratives contained in film are a powerful medium for the transmission of socializing ideas, political concepts, and spiritual attitudes (Engnell, 1995). Before the existence of film, similarly moving narratives were available in poetry and prose. Indeed, philosophers such as MacIntyre (1981) indicate that narratives form the basis for many parts of an individual's communal life and existence. The ancient Hindu work, the *Bhagavad Gita* ("Song of the Lord"), is an example of a putatively timeless narrative concerning war, duty, the ontology of the self, and the metaphysical status of the world (Crim, 1981; Klostermaier, 1998). Written between 500 BC and 200 BC, it is one of the oldest existing narratives on war and human existence (Audi, 1996; Parrinder, 1995). It is ancient Asian narratives such as this that hold the potential to transmit meaning across temporal boundaries into the present.

Similar narrative structures can be seen in modern war films, especially the 1998 film, *The Thin Red Line*, directed by Terrence Malick. This film employs the situation entailed by operations in World War II to offer the viewers messages similar to those of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Widely acclaimed and critically evaluated by the film community (Borman, 1999), no attention has been focused on its striking similarity to ancient Hindu ideas on human existence. A piece of religious writing that has been focused on for 1000's of years by scholars and lay persons (Honderich, 1995) and a popular modern film that has been nominated for seven Academy Awards (Borman, 1999) warrant critical attention to their narrative message.

Both of these works use war and overtly narrative elements to make statements on the nature of good, evil, and human existence (Hiriyanna, 1996; Natale, 1999). This paper hopes to gain insight into the constructions of these themes through narrative in both *The Thin Red Line* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The following two research questions are proposed: *How do the narratives in these two texts portray good and evil?* and *Are the philosophical themes in these two narratives analogous?* Answers to these two foci of inquiry shall be provided through the method of narrative criticism as explicated by such scholars as Fisher (1987) and Foss (1996). Since these works potentially enshrine cross-cultural narratives, an examination of these artifacts is warranted. This paper will first examine the artifacts (texts) to be analyzed, and then explore the methodology to be utilized. After applying this method to each of the artifacts, discussion will follow, answering the research questions that this study provides.

Description of Artifacts

This study focuses on two widely disseminated artifacts, the ancient narrative of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the 1998 film, *The Thin Red Line*. These have been selected because of their common backdrop of war, their popularity, and the powerful narratives they contain.

Bhagavad Gita

The *Bhagavad Gita* is an ancient text that has been the leading emissary of Hindu ideas to the Western world. Minor (1986) indicates that it is the most translated book in the world after the Bible. It also was reputed to be Gandhi's favorite text, one that he read on a daily basis. Radhakrishnan (1998) adds that it is the most popular religious poem in Sanskrit. Deutsch (1968) and Zimmer (1989) argue that it is a significant piece of Hindu philosophical work because it synthetically combines many previous themes into its narrative. Some of these include the illusory nature of the phenomenal world, the self, and issues of dharma (duty) that are prevalent in Hinduism (Cross, 1994; Smith, 1986). The *Bhagavad Gita* begins as a martial narrative about a localized war and quickly transforms into a dialogue transcending any particular context of human existence (Neufeld, 1986).

It is important to realize that this relatively short work is situated in the midst of a longer, more literary work entitled the *Mahabharata* (Babbili, 1997), a work which is several times larger than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. The focus of this larger work was an epic power struggle between two factions of a warring family, the Kurus. Eventually, this family is drawn to war; this is where the *Bhagavad Gita* begins. Set against the backdrop of war, the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna provide the audience with access to ideas covering all human existence. Arjuna begins to question whether he should fight his own family, even if the war appears to be for a just cause. Krishna counsels him, and the dialogue focuses on this thematic persuasion.

One important aspect to keep in mind about the *Bhagavad Gita* is that it has no known historical author (Deutsch, 1968). While typically attributed to the mythical sage Vyasa, Western audiences are constantly "annoyed by the untidy historical consciousness of the Indians"(Deutsch, 1968, p. 4) in not keeping a "true" record of the author of this piece. This interesting fact should not derail critical investigation; part of the power of this cross-cultural artifact is in its ability to affect individuals through its archetypal narrative message.

This work is laid out in short verses, which shall be cited by book/discourse number and verse number (i.e. 9:23). While many excellent translations exist for the *Bhagavad Gita* (Deutsch, 1968; Edgerton, 1995), this paper shall refer to the translation by Easwaren (1985). Further details on the narrative structure of this work will be provided in the application section of this paper.

The Thin Red Line

The Thin Red Line is a critically acclaimed 1998 film from Terrence Malick, based on the novel of the same title by James Jones. This film is set against the backdrop of the invasion of Guadalcanal Island (1942-3) during World War II. Various individuals of "Charlie Company," a US Army unit, are highlighted in this film as they struggle against the Japanese for control of this island. Main characters include various soldiers named Witt, Bell, Doll, and Welsh.

During the visual depiction of fighting and military activity, voice-overs are used while set against stunning shots of foliage, wildlife, and the troops themselves. These voice-overs "result from Malick's lack of sustained interest in conventional narrative. 'The Thin Red Line' is a story told in fragments and shards, in glimpses of action" (Turan, 1999, p. 2). These voice-overs tell a meta-narrative of the story, one that applies to "deep" and universal" issues. As Turan (1999) indicates, "The film's concerns are philosophical rather than dramatic, and its extensive voice-over deals not with story points but with ruminations about how to be a man [or woman] in a world described as 'blowing itself to hell as fast as anyone can arrange it'"(p. 2). Thus, the important point of this film narrative is to convey the messages (carried by the voice-overs) to the audience.

This film is quite long (180 minutes) and includes many chaotic depictions of wartime activity. Various voice-over scenes are included in this artifact; these have been transcribed and will be used as needed in the application portion of this paper. While the film holds many possible interpretations and interesting points of focus, this inquiry will focus on answering the previously mentioned research questions.

Methodology of Narrative

The methodology that shall be used to analyze these artifacts is that of narrative criticism. Much research has focused on using this method of criticism (Carpenter, 1986; Burgchardt, 1985; Lewis, 1987). This method of criticism has its roots in the work of MacIntyre (1981), who indicated "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal"(p. 201). This line of theory concerning the fundamental nature of human communication was developed in earnest by Fisher (1984; 1987). Fisher (1984) argued that the dominant paradigm for human interaction, the "rational world paradigm," was defunct and did not address all the aspects of human communication. It is this reaction against modernity that Toulmin (1992) recounts in his history of modernity and its influences on communication and thought. Thus, in Fisher's (1987) seminal work, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, he proposes that human communication takes the form of a narrative or story that can be examined and criticized accordingly. Two key areas of evaluation are identified by Fisher (1984); *narrative probability* is "what constitutes a coherent story" and *narrative fidelity* concerns "whether the stories they [the audience] experience ring

true with the stories they know to be true in their lives"(p. 8). Rosteck (1992) further explicates these concepts by discussing "split-reference," which

> .... refer[s] both to the situation in the world and to itself. This split reference corresponds to the characteristics of narrative consistency and closure. As the rhetor constructs the connections between the narrative and the situation, the rhetor implicitly makes the case for the consistency of the narrative [*narrative probability*]. As the rhetor asks an audience to see the story as an example, the rhetor utilizes the narrative characteristic of closure [*narrative fidelity*].(p. 30).

These overriding ideas should be within every narrative and should allow one to extract implications of power and value (McGee & Nelson, 1985).

While the *Bhagavad Gita* has no known author, it still exerts influence over its audience, presenting an opportunity to extend narrative theory to cover "anonymous" texts, such as many of the myths and religious works of the Eastern world. Additionally, this study will focus on reconstructing the narratives implicit in the two artifacts to be studied. While some comments will be made in reference to issues of narrative probability and fidelity (both applicable to audience acceptance), these issues shall be left for further research.

In regard to these two artifacts, it is the over-arching narratives that are pertinent to answering the previously mentioned research questions. Babbili (1997) indicates that telling a story is as important as explicitly truth-centered discourse in Hindu culture; this accounts for the placement of the philosophically tinged *Bhagavad Gita* in the middle of a war-filled family epic. Given that narratives often come from traditional literature (Golden, Berquist, & Coleman, 1997), one can predict that common narratives could possibly be found in cross-cultural and temporally distant artifacts—even ones that are separated by 1000's of miles and years.

This study will examine the similar narrative aspects in these two artifacts. While the elements of the dialogue within the *Bhagavad Gita* are fairly easy to identify as narrative, the narrative of *The Thin Red Line* requires more critical selectivity. For the purposes of this paper, the voice-overs shall be examined in order to reconstruct the "meta-narrative" of this film. This can be justified in various ways. First, critics such as Coleman (1999) and Turan (1999) identify the voice-overs as Malick's prime method of delivering major philosophical elements. Second, Radhakrishnan (1998) notes that the battleground is an ideal setting for thinking about ultimate values and issues; thus, *The Thin Red Line* can be considered as similar to the *Bhagavad Gita* in that the scenes of battle are secondary to the main thrust of the narrative. Additionally, Chatman (1992) indicates that voice-overs can assert relationships between ideas and what is viewed. These voice-overs gain focal importance due to the fact that film traditionally depicts that which it is intended to convey to viewers; by selecting the "unpopular" literary device of narration (Chatman, 1992), Malick shifts much of the thematic emphasis to these unique foci within the

artifact. A final reason in support of this sampling of the film text comes from Kolker (1998), who argues that in most films, one will find a textually coherent narrative, identifiable as a unified whole. Thus, one can expect the narratives within the two artifacts in question to be identifiable objects of study; if the suspicion of war being a minor element in this narrative is correct, then a holistic message should emerge from the almost exclusive examination of the voice-overs.

King (1998) indicates that films are liable to differing interpretations, and that these interpretations must be contextually grounded. This analysis does not claim to exhaust all possible interpretations, but merely attempts to place the context of war as portrayed by *The Thin Red Line* next to that portrayed by the *Bhagavad Gita*. There is the very likely possibility that the narrative of the Hindu religious work has cross-cultural manifestations in artifacts such as the film in question.

Foss (1996) details some specific areas to describe and evaluate when examining an artifact's narrative; one should examine the details and interactions inherent in the settings, the characters, and the general themes within that story. This criticism shall proceed by examining the settings of each of the artifacts, followed by the characters and the general themes. Since the *Bhagavad Gita* puts so much emphasis on the thematic side of its dialogic interactions and *The Thin Red Line* includes such unique voice-overs, this paper shall only give the settings and the characters cursory examinations. Nelson (1999) indicates, "voiceovers [sic] often function as framing devices to keep screen events distant from movie viewers"(p. 5). Thus, the narrative goal of these devices within the film in question must be to convey the important "meta-narrative," just as the war motif fades from view as the *Bhagavad Gita* progresses toward portraying its ultimate message. The main power of these artifacts appears to lie in their conveyed themes, and it is this end that the research questions aim.

When examining these themes, Salvador (1994) indicates that it is important to remember that narrative elements attempt to create a persuasive situation in regard to the audience. Issues of narrative coherence and fidelity can be invoked when a critic is explicating the construction and communication of important themes within an artifact. Additionally, Bass (1985) and Deming (1985) argue that narratives should provide a sense of closure to the audience. Thus, it is reasonable to inquire about whether themes are presented in a full and concluded manner, or if they are halted at awkward points in their development. For these two narratives, an important aspect to the "philosophical" themes is the issue of transcendent spirituality; Kirkwood (1983) points out that effective narratives will allow individuals to overcome spiritual obstacles to their "enlightenment" or "growth."

Application

The application of the narrative methodology shall proceed with each artifact being analyzed in terms of major settings, characters, and themes. As previously mentioned, the emphasis in these two "philosophical" pieces shall be on the thematic elements and the messages they convey.

Bhagavad Gita

This artifact takes place on the battlefield where the two opposing sides of the Kuru family have gathered. This battleground is named "Kurukshetra, the field of dharma"(1:1). Dharma means one's "duty" (Klostermaier, 1998), and it is this field that will test the warrior dharma of Arjuna. This battlefield is noisy and chaotic, with "a tremendous noise ar[ising] of conchs and cowhorns and pounding on drums"(1:13). The next setting that is evident is that of Arjuna's chariot. It is in here that the rest of the narrative plays out; Arjuna and Krishna's dialogue encompasses the rest of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This solitary instrument of war provides a quiet place for Arjuna to rest and think about whether he should fight this war or not. It is here that he and Krishna can hold the serious conversation that they are fated to hold free of interference from others. Time appears to stand still for the two individuals in the chariot.

The main characters in this work are Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna is a mighty warrior who asks Krishna, his charioteer, to drive between the two opposing armies before the battle begins. Once there, Arjuna sees "fathers and grandfathers, teachers, uncles, and brothers, sons and grandsons, in-laws and friends. Seeing his own kinsmen established in opposition, Arjuna was overcome by sorrow"(1:26-27). Arjuna refuses to fight and questions Krishna as to whether he should fight his own family and relations. The rest of the *Bhagavad Gita* focuses on Krishna trying to persuade Arjuna why he should fight this war. At this point, Krishna is only his conversational partner; toward the end of the work, he reveals his true nature. Krishna is an avatar, an incarnation of the divine power or "self" here on earth. Thus, many of Krishna's statements are issued dogmatically, especially toward the end of the work.

Other characters include the Kurus, aligned against each other as the Pandavas (Arjuna, Yudhishthira, Bhima, Sahadeva, and Nakula) and the Kauravas (Bhishma, Karna, Kripa, Ashvatthama, and Vikarna). While all of these characters are Kurus, the Pandavas ("the sons of Pandu") challenge the ruling power of the Kuru family and are thus distinguished by the new group name (Easwaren, 1985). Krishna is not party to either side in matters of war; he serves as Arjuna's charioteer and advisor. All of these characters (save Arjuna and Krishna) are relatively minor players in this narrative; they drop out after the first chapter and serve mainly to provide the moral dilemma of war to Arjuna. An interesting facet of these characters, however, is their lack of volitional dynamism. Foss (1996) details how characters can be "round" or "flat." "Round characters...possess a variety of traits...their behavior is less predictable than that of flat

characters because they are likely to change and to continue to reveal previously unknown traits"(p. 402). "Flat" characters, however, have "one or just a few dominating traits, making the behavior of the character highly predictable"(p. 402). From the depiction of these "distinguished" and "mighty" *warriors*, one can see that they are very ready to do battle; they seem to be predetermined to fight. On the contrary, Arjuna seems to be a "round" character because of his changing attitudes on actually fighting this war. Krishna's character changes his level of self-disclosure to Arjuna and the audience through the course of the narrative; he eventually reveals himself in his true, god-like form to Arjuna.

The dialogue of Arjuna and Krishna covers many themes and philosophical issues. The conversation starts when Arjuna refuses to fight against his own friends and family in the ranks of the opposing army; Krishna then sets out to convince him to uphold his dharma as a warrior. As also noted by Koller (1985), two main themes can be seen to emerge among the various arguments or appeals Krishna gives in his discussion with Arjuna. First, the theme of the relation between the empirical or physical self and the "ultimate" self is evident in this text. The second theme of the path to realizing this "ultimate" self also becomes apparent.

Concerning the metaphysical theme of the relation between the everyday notion one has of self (physical) and the ultimate source of all things (Brahman, or "ultimate" self), Krishna has much to say. While Arjuna fears the evil that lies within killing his own relations and friends Krishna implores him to uphold his duty. Krishna argues that the physical self is merely an illusion, and that the "ultimate" self within us does not die:

> One man believes he is the slayer, another believes he is the slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither slayer nor slain. You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. Realizing that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and unchanging, how can you slay or cause another to slay? (2:19-21).

Here the idea is introduced that the world and the self we typically think of as being "real" is an illusion; the actions that we take here really do not affect one's true personality. The real meaning of one's "self" is in relation to the "ultimate" self, personified by Krishna in human guise. It is this self that is described as "The Self of all beings"(2:30). Krishna continues this explanation by saying "I [Krishna as the personification of ultimate self] am ever present to those who have realized me in every creature…all life [is] my manifestation"(6:30). Even the perceived change in the world all takes place within the ultimate metaphysical reality of the self; "The birth and dissolution of the cosmos takes place in me. There is nothing that exists separate from me"(7:6-7).

Even the multiplicity of forms one observes in everyday life has its basis in ultimate self; "all the different qualities found in living creatures have their source in me"(10:5). Even the

creatures themselves (including humans) are all fundamentally united with the ultimate self; "I am the true Self in the heart of every creature, Arjuna, and the beginning, middle, and end of there existence"(10:20). Arjuna eventually acknowledges that "You [Krishna as ultimate self] pervade everything; you are everything"(11:40). Thus, the typical individuation that we intuitively sense about our existence is an illusion; Brahman, or ultimate self, is the true reality.

This true reality gets lost to the illusions of self we egoistically create due to the play of the "three gunas." These "states of sattva, rajas, and tamas come from me [ultimate self], but I am not in them. These three gunas deceive the world: people fail to look beyond them to me, supreme and imperishable"(7:12-13). The illusion of ego and separateness from the ultimate self are enabled by these shadow-like illusions of the gunas. Krishna is arguing that humans deny their ontological unity with all things because of this illusion of ego individuation. Krishna exclaims to Arjuna that "I am time, the destroyer of all; I have come to consume the world. Even without your participation, all the warriors gathered here will die...I have already slain all these warriors; you will only be my instrument"(11:32-33). Arjuna is too attached to the illusion that what happens with his physical body and on this empirical battlefield are real; Krishna is revealing to him the ultimate self that lies within every part of this phenomenal world. Krishna counsels Arjuna to accept the reality of the ultimate, undivided self in all; "He alone sees truly who sees the Lord the same in every creature, who sees the Deathless in the hearts of all that die"(13:27).

The second theme in the *Bhagavad Gita* deals with how one is to act upon becoming enlightened about the true nature of ultimate self. Since one's empirical self is an illusion, how is one to act? What is the goal of action? Initially, Krishna points out that "there is no one who rests for even an instant; every creature is driven to action by his own nature"(3:5). Thus, Arjuna must act in the situation he finds himself in; retreat and inaction are not options. The true sense of being that Arjuna aims for is enlightenment; Krishna indicates that he should "seek refuge in the attitude of detachment and you will amass the wealth of spiritual awareness"(2:49). This attitude of detachment comes from the dispelling of the empirical self; "they live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them, who have renounced every selfish desire and sense craving tormenting the heart"(2:55).

The fundamental impetus for action is the recognition that action is unavoidable and that the self is an illusion. Given these two claims, one must try to act in such a way as to not deny the reality of ultimate self. Krishna implores Arjuna to "use all your power to free the senses from attachment and aversion alike, and live in the full wisdom of the self"(2:68). The rewards of this union with the ultimate self are immense; "they are forever free who renounce all selfish desires and break away from the ego-cage of 'I,' 'me,' and 'mine' to be united with the Lord [ultimate self]. This is the supreme state. Attain to this, and pass from death to

immortality"(2:71). Arjuna is told to "act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit" (3:9) and to "fight! But stay free from the fever of the ego"(3:30). The overarching theme is that action should be performed with the realization that ego is an illusion; selfless action leads to liberation from the trap of ego attachment.

The Thin Red Line

The settings in *The Thin Red Line* are on various Pacific islands, most notably that of Guadalcanal. The first setting is that of the Solomon Islands, however, where Private Witt and a fellow soldier have gone "absent without leave." They spend their time swimming and relaxing among the peaceful Melanesian natives (Turan, 1999). This setting is blissful and reminiscent of the biblical Eden; the natives know little selfishness and take only what they need to survive from their environment. This setting changes when a US patrol boat comes and takes the two AWOL soldiers back to their proper unit, Charlie Company.

The next settings are those of the transport ship and the island of Guadalcanal. These settings are important not only because of their depiction of the secondary narrative (the war story), but also because they provide the vistas and the backdrops for the voice-overs that this film features so prominently. The settings on the ship and on the island are both quite chaotic and noisy; the invasion of the island and the subsequent military maneuvers all are realistically portrayed. Additionally, the beauty of the island and the presence of the soldiers provide ample material for the visual elements in the voice-over montages.

The main characters in the war narrative are Private Witt, Sergeant Welsh, Private Bell, Private Doll, Captain Staros, Lieutenant Colonel Tall, and Private Fife. Of all these characters, the emphasis lies mostly on the trials and journey of Witt; others, such as Bell and Doll also receive some attention and experience some dramatic development throughout the secondary narrative of the war story. Witt can truly be considered a "round" character; he begins by fleeing the war and any part he might take in it. After being removed from his island retreat, he is forced to come to some decisions on whether he should participate in the war and how that participation should proceed. Bell and Doll also experience some development that could lead one to categorize them as "round" characters. Most of the other characters, like the supporting cast of warriors in the *Bhagavad Gita*, exist as part of the war machine; they are either predetermined to be active players in the war effort (Tall and Welsh) or struggle to get out of it (Staros). These supporting characters can be evaluated as being "flat" due to the predetermined nature of their actions and attitudes.

Two themes emerge within the voice-overs; the ideas of the ultimate self and selfless action are evident in the meta-narrative over the war story in this film. As Coleman (1999) notes, "the characters are all blended together [in the voice-overs]"(p. 2); Turan (1999) adds "it's anyone's guess at certain moments which one [character] is speaking [during the voice-over]"(p.

2). This leads to the distancing of the viewer from the secondary narrative (the war story) and toward more focus on the main narrative about existential matters. This cinematic element leads one to conclude that who says what is less important than the truths conveyed in these instances. The first voice-over, apparently recited by Doll, states, "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contends with the sea. Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?" Here the theme of individuation in nature is being explored; why is there so much violence in the world? During this voice-over, shots of vine-entangled trees are shown, contrasted with peaceful shots of natives swimming and going about daily life.

Another voice-over also depicts the tropical flora and fauna; birds and waving trees that creak and groan against the assault of the wind are shown. The voice of Doll says, "Who are you that lives in all these many forms? You're death that captures all. You too are the source of all that's going to be born. You're glory, mercy, peace, truth; you give calm a spirit." The theme of a common soul or self behind the diversity in this phenomenal world is evident in this important voice-over. Not only is nature at war, but it is fighting itself. This concept of ultimate self in this film is extended in the next voice-over, this time by Witt, who states, "Maybe all men got one big soul, where everybody's a part of it. All faces of the same man, one big self. Everyone looking for salvation by himself, each like a coal, drawn from the fire." Here the meta-narrative is arguing that the ultimate self that encompasses all of nature also subsumes humanity. This voice-over takes place against a silent depiction of Witt at the medic camp, consoling wounded soldiers and observing the suffering of individuals in this war effort. The idea of ego-attachment and separation are looked down upon as means to "salvation" in that they inevitably lead to the quickly dying ember or spark of life, like a coal pulled out of the fire. Witt selflessly comforts a wounded soldier by splashing water on his heated body; the suffering of others emerges as a potent reminder of our ultimate unity.

Toward the end of the film, Doll narrates another voice-over, this one set against a montage of shots from the soldier's setting up camp for the night and the beautiful scenery itself. Doll states "One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. But death's got the final word; it's laughing at them. Another man sees that same bird and feels the glory, feels something smiling through it." As the last lines are spoken, the image of Witt sleeping is focused on, a foreshadowing of thematic developments to come. The voice-over addresses the issue of death and immortality of our individuated selves; if the empirical self is to escape finitude, it must avoid death. But this narrative tells us that death has the "final word;" death always claims the empirical self, be it a bird or the warring soldiers. Enlightenment about the true nature of reality allows one to see the ultimate base of life and reality shining through the empirical self; in this case, the dying bird is employed as a metaphor for human frailty. The

theme emerging from these voice-overs is that the empirical egos and selves that populate this world are not the true basis of reality; there is a greater, more ultimate self behind it all.

The second theme that emerges from these voice-overs concerns action in the face of this world of change and hardship. At the start of the film, Witt states

> I remember my momma when she was dying. She looked all shrunk up and gray. I asked her if she was afraid and she just shook her head; I was afraid to touch the death I see in her. I couldn't find anything beautiful or uplifting about her going back to God…I wondered how it would be like when I died. What it'd be like to know that this breath now is the last one you're ever gonna draw. I just hope I can meet it the same way as she did, with the same calm. Cause that's where it's hidden, the immortality that I hadn't seen.

The issue of death is ever present in the war narrative; it is more fundamentally present in the primary narrative of this film that speaks on issues facing every human. Here we are given images of Witt on the beach and observing native life while recounting the feelings and thoughts he had surrounding the specter of death. Death can be met in a noble fashion with a air of detachment and calm; fearfully and stubbornly clinging to one's ego does not allow for immortality.

Witt is also "confronted" later in the film with the frightening vision of a dead Japanese soldier covered up to his face with dirt. This slain warrior's voice-over talks not only to Witt, but also to the audience, saying "Are you righteous, kind; does your confidence lie in this? Are you loved by all? Know that I was, too. Do you imagine yourself being less because you loved goodness, truth?" The dead soldier is a visible reminder of the cost of war; beyond that, however, it is a reminder of the inherent weakness in the physical form that humans strive to preserve indefinitely. The soldier's words reinforce the theme of selfless action and kindness. Even though death takes one's life, it does not take that which makes them part of the universe—one's capacity to see the whole in others and to act in such a way as to invoke the "love of all." These actions espouse the love of others. Doll argues in another voice-over that "war don't ennoble men, it turns them into dogs. Poisons the soul." While these words are being recited, images of US soldiers fighting with each other are shown, as well as a soldier who had collected the gold-filled teeth of dead Japanese soldiers. War is seen as encompassing hateful feelings and actions, thus rendering it not a truly unifying activity that allows transcendence of individualistic conceptions of self.

Discussion

Research question 1 asks *How do the narratives in these two texts portray good and evil?* An answer to this can now be provided on the basis of the previously described application of narrative methodology to the two artifacts under study. Both the *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Thin*

Red Line convey a similar picture of good and evil to the audience; it seems as if they are very similar quantities here on earth. The *Bhagavad Gita* portrays evil as a lack of knowledge; thus, when Arjuna is given the various arguments to fight and uphold his dharma, the only sense of good seems to be analogous to enlightenment about the metaphysical basis of human existence. Since all is one with the ultimate spirit, Krishna counsels Arjuna (and the audience) that death and change are truly illusory (2:19-22). "Evil," if it is to be said to be substantially different from any use of "good," seems associated with the willful continuation of the illusion of the empirical self. This illusion causes one to fear death, to try to sate all their desires, and to act selfishly toward others. Krishna states that "Great souls make their lives perfect and discover me [Brahman]; they are freed from mortality and the suffering of this separate existence"(8:15). The issue of separateness is key in the *Bhagavad Gita*; those who are separate from the ultimate soul allow for the intimate experience of suffering and deprivation through individuation. This is why the great Hindu sage Sankara (1992) states that "the soul is subject to evil only through ignorance"(p. 318); lack of enlightenment allows those who suffer the chance to label their misfortunes "evil," when the true evil is a lack of knowledge on their part. According to Isherwood and Prabhavananda (1999), this lack of enlightenment results in "all selfish motives and actions [which] belong to ethical evil"(p. 58). As Gelblum (1992) indicates, a major motive of the *Bhagavad Gita* is to convey the message of goodness lying in the renunciation of selfish action and intention.

The voice-overs in *The Thin Red Line* seem to make a similar argument about good and evil. Evil is seen as selfish action, the searching for one's own selfish "salvation by himself, each like a coal drawn from the fire." This separation in the *Bhagavad Gita* is attributed to attachment to the empirical self (Teschner, 1992); a similar theme emerges in the film under study. Humanity's own actions, such as this war, seem to support this interpretation of Doll's voice-over when he says "We were a family, how did it break up and come apart, so that now we're turned against each other, each standing in the other's light? How did we lose the good that was given us?" As he recites these lines, images of happy natives and families of chickens are shown as symbolic of the unity that nature is capable of. Humans have acted selfishly and thrown away our unity through actions such as the war that these characters find themselves in. In another voice-over, the ruthless actions and horror of war are contrasted to the apologetic words "This great evil, where does it come from? How did it steal into the world? What seed, what root did it grow from? Who's doing this? Who's killing us? Robbing us of life and light. Mocking us with the sight of what we might have known." Here evil is identified as separateness and selfishness, but the cause is not clearly attributed to humanity. The tone of this segment of the film seems to be questioning how humans became ensnared in the world of maya, the Hindu title for the phenomenal illusions that hold us from unity with the ultimate self (Chinmoy, 1996). In the

words of the dead Japanese soldier, it is the good that leads us to be "loved by all." As Deutsch (1968) points out, good lies in the realization of unity in the spirit, whereas evil lies in the opposition to this unifying intuition.

The second research question asks *Are the philosophical themes in these two narratives analogous?* Based on the previous study, a few important similarities emerge in regard the philosophical themes within these two works. One such theme deals with the nature of one's dharma. Both narratives appear to make the argument that one should critically examine and accept his or her dharma. At the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna loses the urge to fight in this war that pits him against his family and friends. Krishna uses argument and dialogue to pull him out of this state and allows him to motivate his own acceptance of his dharma. A similar theme starts the secondary narrative of *The Thin Red Line* when Witt is AWOL on a peaceful island. He has run away from the war, not wanting to take part in his "duty" as a soldier to fight. The rest of the secondary narrative deals with Witt's reconciliation of his duty and the ultimate nature of the world. These characters are "round" and dynamic; one should not leave the execution of dharma to fate (Sartwell, 1993), but should instead take a critical role in this activity.

It is this reinterpretation of soldiers' and everyone's dharma in light of selfless action that inform another theme of these works. Both of these works emphasize the fact that the empirical self is some type of illusion—from the film's musings that "maybe all men got one big soul, where everybody's a part of it" to the *Bhagavad Gita*'s "I am the true Self in the heart of every creature"(10:20). From this given comes the realization that the war within nature, or in the guna-drawn world of our empirical existence, evil is nothing but a lack of ontological enlightenment or honesty. Humans need to be able to admit that their physical self is not the crux or center of this existence and their actions should reflect this disposition.

The actions of the enlightened ones in both the film and in the *Bhagavad Gita* are comparable; an example of this is the selflessness of Witt. Witt, throughout the entire film, strove toward the ideals of non-violence and compassion for others. He was kind to both wounded US soldiers and to the captured Japanese soldiers. This theme was further reified in the climax of the secondary narrative when Witt distracts a group of Japanese soldiers from pursuing the rest of his unit. He draws them away, but eventually is surrounded by them. Instead of giving up, he waits a few pensive moments and then raises his rifle, instantly drawing the lethal fire of the soldiers around him. Here was Witt's ultimate act of selflessness and duty, saving his fellow soldiers and calmly letting go of his attachment to his empirical self.

It is this type of action and selflessness that Doll honors in the final voice-over. Amidst shots of leaving the island on a transport ship, he states "Darkness and light, strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes, look out at the things you made. All things shining." The shot

fades into a serene scene of a coconut sprouting a new shoot on a beach, with islands and sky in the background. These images and words point to the over-riding argument of the narrative; there is something larger than the selves humans believe they physically inhabit. Spiritually, humans can believe that both good and evil within this world might be mere illusions, "features of the same face." Both of these works, either in the personage of Arjuna or Doll, beg for reunification with the source of our illusory selves—one wants their empirical self to "be in you [the larger sense of self] now." Just as the coconut stands at the edge of every element by itself, humanity stands alone in its self-imposed exile from the over-arching ultimate self. The aim of these two works, however, is to allow the audience to realize the interconnectedness and fundamental unity to all things, coconuts and humans alike. In a similar way to Yogi (1990), Rama (1998) points out that "the Self-realized [person] sees the eternal, omnipresent, omniscient, pure Self everywhere. He sees himself [and herself] in all and all in himself [and herself]"(p. 251).

Both of these artifacts convey the same themes of unity and selfless action. An interesting divergence, however, comes in the judgment on war. The *Bhagavad Gita* revolves around Krishna attempting to convince Arjuna that he *should* fight—in this instance it is what his warrior dharma commands him to do. *The Thin Red Line*, however, seems to make an opposite judgment on war; according to Doll's statement "war don't ennoble men, it turns them into dogs. Poisons the soul." How are these two seemingly divergent themes to be reconciled? One way out of this dilemma is through examining the nature of the war being fought. Krishna describes the war that Arjuna is about to take part in as "a war against evil"(2:31). Here the enemies are personally known and the fighting is contained (at least in this part of the *Mahabharata*) to one battlefield. Part of the argument of the film, however, is that war kills not only the humanity within the other army, but it slays that which is selfless within oneself. The enemy in the Pacific theater was the Japanese; this war is conceptualized by the secondary narrative of the film as being about "property" and overly political.

Perhaps these arguments are emphasizing similar points. Deutsch (1968) points out that in the *Bhagavad Gita*, "a brotherhood of man [and woman] exists by virtue of the indwelling presence of the Divine in man [and woman]; one's own kinsmen [and women] are always in the opposing army"(p. 17). The very situation of harming another human being brings harm upon ourselves; we are, in a metaphysical sense, harming our own family. This idea is echoed by Doll's voice-over of "we were a family, how did it break up?" In this sense, war always pits human against human, family member against family member. To this extent, when war is forced upon Arjuna, perhaps Krishna is justified in claiming that the correct action (remembering that inaction is impossible) is to fight for the just side. The film simply voices the angst that humans find themselves mired in as a result of being forced into violent situations; this could be a powerful element of these works' narrative fidelity with the experiences of the audience.

Conclusion

This critical examination has focused on two important works, one ancient Hindu religious poem, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and a modern American film, *The Thin Red Line*. Both of these artifacts use narratives to construct various themes and appeals to the audience. It is this use of narrative in two philosophically reflective works that could be cross-culturally significant and timeless (Flood, 1996). This paper has analyzed these two artifacts through the methodology of narrative criticism. The artifacts have been described, along with an explication of the methodology.

This critical method has been applied to the artifacts with the aim of answering the research questions of *How do the narratives in these two texts portray good and evil?* and *Are the philosophical themes in these two narratives analogous?* The study has shown that both artifacts portray evil as an inclination toward selfish action and the refusal to acknowledge a transcendent "ultimate" self behind the physical self of each human. The film points out that nature and humanity, once individuated and self-absorbed, go to war with itself. Mohanty (1997) highlights the same aspect of selfishness and lack of dharma in the *Bhagavad Gita*. That which is good is that which leads one toward enlightenment, a difficult task in the violent battlefields of World War II, the *Mahabharata*, and the human condition itself. Both works also had similar themes in regard to issues of duty, selfless action, and the horror of war. This study does not claim to exhaust the hermeneutic import of either of these two texts; on the contrary, it hopes to stimulate more work on the narrative elements within these two interesting and influential works. While cultural elements are evident in both works (the Western bias against "gurus" shines through in the lack of a "teacher" for Witt), the thrust of the narratives remains astonishingly similar. There is a fundamental unity to all that we experience in this illusory world, and our empirical self is not the foundation of our true selves. Heeding these truths, the two works admonish selfishness and attempt to instill some inclination toward selfless action in the hearts and minds of the audience.

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